

## The Problem | Save Mille Lacs Sport Fishing

[HOME](#)[THE PROBLEM](#)[THE SOLUTION](#)[HOW TO HELP](#)[UPDATES](#)[CONTACT](#)[DONATE](#)

## THE PROBLEM

## The Problem

As far as history reaches, Lake Mille Lacs in central Minnesota has been described as a "walleye factory". Sport anglers, in unprecedented numbers, have flocked to the vast waters of Lake Mille Lacs for over a century to find, catch and eat the crown jewel of all freshwater fish...the walleye. Lake Mille Lacs walleyes have been second to none among sport anglers anywhere on the North American continent.

Entering the new millennium, that Lake Mille Lacs history started to change. In 1998, Federal courts granted several upper Midwest Native American Bands the right to harvest Lake Mille Lacs walleyes based on a treaty written and signed onto in 1837.

The courts ordered the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Indian Bands to negotiate a plan that would include a shared fishery harvest between sport anglers and Band members. The Band members were allowed to harvest Lake Mille Lacs fish, mainly walleyes, above and beyond Minnesota sport angling rules and regulations if they stayed within acceptable levels of "conservation, public safety and public health". Exclusive Band harvest rights were based on "subsistence needs". The shared harvest was to be done in an "equitable" fashion between sport anglers and Tribal fishermen.

The Minnesota DNR agreed to allowing the Tribal harvest of Lake Mille Lacs walleyes via the use of gill-nets during the annual period of time the walleyes are congregated in shallow shoreline areas spawning. Sport anglers have never been and still are not allowed to harvest vulnerable spawning Lake Mille Lacs walleyes, based on Minnesota regulations put into place to protect the viability of the walleye population. Spawning walleyes, generally, have been off limits to any form of harvest in Minnesota for many decades, until the Tribal harvest was allowed to include the spawning season at Lake Mille Lacs using gill-nets as the main wholesale method for their walleye harvest. For over a decade, miles of Tribal gill-nets have been killing up to 65 tons of spawning walleyes each spring at Lake Mille Lacs. Many of which go unaccounted for. Many of which become wanton waste.

Based on annual Lake Mille Lacs walleye population surveys done by the Minnesota DNR fisheries managers, various aspects of the Lake Mille Lacs walleye population have been heading in a negative direction since the Tribal harvest was a part of the overall annual walleye harvest. In the fall of 2012, Minnesota DNR walleye population survey numbers at Lake Mille Lacs plummeted to a 40 year low. With the overall low numbers of walleyes in general found in the 2012 walleye population survey, a huge imbalance of both gender and size of walleyes were found at an alarming level. Levels, no doubt per the fisheries biologists, that need to be brought back into balance to insure the walleye population in the future can again be healthy, getting back to historical and acceptable numbers that were consistent for decades before the Tribal harvest was enacted.

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Wasted Lake Mille Lacs fish dumped on private property